

The Skeleton

WHEN Philaster was alive, he and I were often busy with records of great beauty that had long ago flourished. In solitary places, and in hours removed and hedged around from the straight main road of time's advance, we pondered the names of Calypso, Ariadne, Electra, Eurypyle, Megalostate, Dido, Camilla, Lucrezia Borgia, the two Isouds, Olwen and Mary Hynes of Ireland and many more. Together we framed their features and their motion. Sometimes, as we sat, we heard their voices in the outside darkness which our lamps made wonderful and more dark, and in the wind we heard the voice of Medea calling for Jason, Andromache calling for Hector. There was a distant lawn among woods, watched for many days with surmising but incurious eyes from our window, and never visited, which was not simply grass, but grass refined by sunlight and memory until it seemed as far off in time as in space and as secluded; and there, on one day, we saw Helen, not so proud but that she was regretful, talking with Achilles, while Thetis and Aphrodite, who had brought him to her presence for the first and only time, stood by. "Had I been Paris," he was saying, "I should have been content not to have been Achilles." To which Helen answered: "Had you been Paris, you had not been content to have been less than Achilles."

Foolishly and passionately—and so, perhaps, wisely—we talked of the immortality of beauty, though the last hair of Lucrezia were lost; and told one another that in the sculpture and poetry of Greece no woman that was not beautiful is remembered. And while he lived I could not do other than believe. Once we watched a blade of emerald flame in the fire; but soon he clapped his hands impatiently and it disappeared; and once it was gone it was immortal, so he said; and he loved best those vanishing things which the mind quickly makes its own, since nothing dies save what we let die.

Whether in the fields, or in the streets, or in chambers enclosing and opening upon beauty, we locked ourselves in the past. Many days I can recall when we looked out into a rich, lonely country under rain, and the two things real to us were the Virgils in our hands and the soft oblivious rain that made a solitude and made us lords of it. Our chamber and the quiet fields differed not in kind from the places where the mind beholds the past with closed eyes. Not for us those books which are but a plagiari-

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from life! Rather those from which our lives sometimes dare to plagiarize. . . . But now Calypso, Ariadne, Electra, Eurypyle, Megalistrate are dead; Dido, Camilla, Lucrezia Borgia, the two Isouds, Olwen, Mary Hynes of Ireland, are dead: for Philaster is dead. And how can I tell of him? for his presence gave me the great wisdom which made me care for him. That wisdom has flown with him. If I declare what voice and features, what knowledge and wit were his, a diligent lover might think that he could guess, from such an inventory, what Philaster was. It will be no more than a brazen image of what he was. I am the fond Holinshed of his story, and cannot translate out of silence.

The face, which is in any man the subtle result of a hundred centuries of thoughts and sensations and emotions, in him was not so much a result as the first draft of a wonderful achievement, towards which I saw it ever on its way. Every moon, every sun, and all the winds cherished and changed him, as if it had been their sweetest toil. The splendour and the beauty and the sorrow of all his books entered his face, and not merely as passing shadows enter a lake, but as it would be if that lake were the richer for these transient deposits. Shakespeare, Leonardo, Pheidias, were as musicians that played upon some strings of his soul. He might be counted among their inventions. I have walked with him in the dawn, and as the cold light and half-seen, half-imagined beauty had their way with his face—speech having ceased an hour before—I could have bowed to him in worship, so much was he an emanation or ivory image of the dawn; he knew all things, it seemed, and was at one with them. But when he spoke after such an adventure, it was with difficulty and faults that went strangely with the glory in his face. The words came as if against his will. Human speech seemed to be wrong and far astray from the path it would have taken had there been a Philaster in the old time. It was as a foreign tongue, uncouth and unintelligible. Moreover it frightened the things that fitted his brain, as a human voice frightens a cove of nightingales. . . . After a long June day on the Cherwell he once walked into Oxford for a bottle of wine, and when he returned to the boat he told me laughingly that his brain had been full of compliments like sapphires for the woman who served him, and that he had not found it in his heart to say a word. . . . I have seen him in the autumn come bemused with

spiritual joy into a country inn, and raise a fear by his wild accent and wild eyes and his nostrils wide as if he smelt pines or the sea. Slowly the beer and tobacco altered the sphere of his devotions. His own pipe was lit, his tankard filled. He joined with a religious ardour in Bacchic and other songs, and could not laugh at them as others did. And he would say that in such an inn he could wish it were always autumn, always evening, and his capacity fathoms deep. For, with all his variety, I think he would gladly have accepted one experience for ever. Nothing became stale to him, and so his mutability was the more marvellous. Wherever he was, he seemed to have been born there. As one moment will now and then, often in dreams of sleep, sometimes in other dreams, assume the puissance and everything essential of years, so he assumed the puissance of great and varied experiences which never had been and never would be his. Hardly could his calm physical splendour destroy the sense of terror to which the surprising tyranny of his untried, untutored mind gave rise. He confessed, indeed, an imperfect capacity of appreciation in regard to many things; but from none of these would he turn without a salute. He brought me a long way to admire a noisy hawker who produced one note in his cry more notably than he ever heard it elsewhere.

I remember one day in March as particularly his, because without him it would have been a task to live it.

It was a delicate, still, grey morning—cold, but with the first heat of spring suggested behind the mist. The sun had shone early, and the last night's frost, turned into a white steam on the ploughlands, wavered a little, like a sheet with some one stirring beneath it, and disappeared. Not a bird was singing; there was no flower in the hedge; the grass was hardly green. On the low hills we could see a small white wreath of snow. The roads were heavy; a coarse school-bell jangled; the sordid corpse of a squirrel lay in the hedge. But the very snow, which had seemed to me as a slave's collar on the day, to Philaster gave the air a sad poignancy that was sweet. "Look!" he cried, as we first saw the white form of snow among the woods on the hill, "Pan has caught Luna at last, and there she lies, too pleased with his quiet woods ever to rise again." If there were no flowers, there was a sense of innumerable buds. If there was no song, the air was rich as when

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a great music has ceased, and contained song as in a bud. Gradually, as we watched the mist, we dreamed of what lay behind. Were they really the hills and woods we knew? For they were as they had never been before. No one was near. We would pursue the footpath and surprise Pan making new pipes for the Spring. So we set forth, but had hardly reached the crest of the first hill when we stopped together. The air had become softer and caressing, and clearly said that it was of no use to walk and that all things come to him who dreams under a hedge and is content to dream. So clearly did the air speak that we had not rested long before we rose. "This is some plot," said Philaster; "in the next hollow, perhaps, Pan is hiding. Let us go." But he was not there; at least, we saw him not. And again, at a hill-top, we reclined; again we thought that the air had a purpose in thus imprisoning us and even making us acquiesce in our bonds: again we walked, and this time crossed several hills and hollows; and ever, at a summit, the next hill, clothed in wood and mist, seemed to be the one we desired. At last we paused again, and watched the sun set beyond the next hill. "Yonder he must be," we said, and, as we gazed and gazed, and darkness darkened and a diffident moon grew white, we were thinking of the hill beyond, until our senses became aware of more than is ever seen or felt or heard, and a great sigh passed through the wood, and we knew that what we sought was there. The sky was of a tender and solemn blue that lasts five minutes and looks eternal. It was a colour that had for us the same exquisite and surprising quality as the blue of thrush's eggs found in childhood and in loneliness, before time "brought death into the world and all our woe."

Philaster and I had found our first thrush's eggs at about the same time in the same wood. We had met in the days when the morning air was stronger than wine is now. As each new day shone upon the glass of a bedside picture and awakened us, we thought of it as never to end; evening was as if it had never been. We were confident, important; bragging as a rose brags with all its leaf and flower; never considering the six feet of earth and an unnecessary stone.

But every man has two childhoods: first, the early years of his life; second, those early years as they appear to him afterwards, moulded by the art of reminiscence, with changes, gains

and losses, until the end. Men in whom these two differ greatly are not often happy, and perhaps they are always melancholy. In Philaster's case the two were almost invariably different. They differed as failure and success. The real (if I may so distinguish it from the other, which was far more real and impressive to his mind)—the real was the failure: for it was foolish and not wild; selfish and not independent; coarse and not obtuse; fond and not loving; fitful and not passionate. But one or two incidents there were of a painful kind, which, happening in notable, beautiful surroundings, were likely to be seared along with them into his brain, as indeed they were. How easily and pleasantly does old pain help us to remember! how the sudden, cruel fall from a tree helps us to recall that the reddest apples in all the world hung there on one October dawn—as if they hung there still somewhere in the dim lands of the brain! And what early books are remembered like those whose words fell upon a brain languidly sensitive after long discomfort or pain?

One May day, when he was yet of an age to run fast and hopefully towards the horizon to catch the white cloud which was calmly sailing thither, he was running so, when he was tripped, and fell and tore the collar of his tunic in the fall. It was a fair tunic, and a fair thorn bush that tore it; but the rent was foul; so he lay and consoled himself by being sad. The day was one of many cold, bright days which had delayed the hawthorns. But there, upon the bush, was the first May flower. As he went to pluck it, the white cloud reached the horizon and the air was very still. The yellow flowers, that had flamed before, now glowed, warmer but more dim. The white flowers lost distinctness and made a still haze along the hedge. The lark ceased to sing, or rose but to the height of the oaks and forgot and descended. The white road that had seemed but a cheerful link from village to village was now so long, so long, that it was as a road in a picture and could never be travelled; and instead of making the hawthorn bush a half-mile mark, it made it lonely and strange, and Philaster could not pluck the flower. Then, suddenly, as if it had been the work of that strange, lonely land, of all those dim flowers and silent birds, the noise of bells arose, and Philaster began to walk, and sang continually new phrases for the notes of the six bells, until he came to the churchyard. There, in all the warmth of the

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tower and the bells that were but the murmur of that warmth, he fell asleep. And long he would have slept, because the air was seething and bubbling over with the sound of the bells. But the headstone that was his pillow was hard though warm, and rough with a permanent gold and copper dust like the remains of embossed work, and a voice as sweet as the bells and more shrill was repeating their notes. The voice, too, had a face and hands and hair and a short green frock, and the hands were breaking up flowers and dropping them on Philaster's face, so that he awoke. As he opened his eyes he saw the girl, as if she had grown out of the sound as the sound had grown out of the morning that was so lonely and so strange. At first her beauty alarmed him, and, thinking of a book, he asked: "Is your name Isoud?" But she laughed, and he knew that she was not Isoud. Then he had the courage to ask if she would pin up his collar. "Yes," she said; "and then I must go away. I am going a long way to-day. We shall drive past here, and you must wait and watch me go." "Yes," he said. "Tell me if I hurt," said she, as she pinned up his collar. Then she ran away. In half-an-hour he saw her go by with a laugh; but he cried bitterly when she was out of sight, because the pin had gone into his neck, and more gorgeous than all the flowers, and warmer than the sun, was the purple blood. And so, dimly and bitterly desired on that first day, gravely remembered for a week, and then for a few years forgotten, and again recovered in memory on another day like that, she grew into the perfect lost rose, with the memory of which he would never part, with the loss of which he would never acquiesce. . . .

Such a one was Philaster. But that was in the time when the world was no more to us than a stoat's skin, shrivelled and hairless, not even foul-scented, on a stable wall. As we went on through time, our conversation became the most intimate I ever had. With him I discovered myself; he had, perhaps, a like experience. But at all times he indolently monarchized in silence and in speech when we were together. His sympathy was so acute and, in expression, so womanly; his intelligence so free from principles, conclusions, generalizations; his joy so splendid; his melancholy so tender and yet without languor or submission; his voice so perfect, that I was often made ashamed of my own passionate words. He echoed my deepest emotions with easy

luxuriance. Had I thought or dreamed or loved in such a way, then so had he. Had I learned in some potent solitary wood or crowded street that the soul affirms many things which the reason has neither the right nor the ability to deny, then so had he.

A day came when I went chilled and lonely away from his company, and could be restored only by his presence and the strange security and isolation which his voice and look established. I dared to think that he was but a flawless marble effigy above the bones of his dead youth, and that prudence was the sculptor. Where he used to be unaware of the world, he came to despise it and use it. And I became a rebel: yet the object of my rebellion could quell it by his simple presence, and my plots vanished at his appearance as ghosts at sunrise. For still he kept his lovely gift of penetrating the secret of every hour and using it. Still, as we sat by the fire, would our souls be now blown about together by the great winds to which the chimneys were a many-reeded pipe, and now warmed by the calm glow; and still would he be as one of the gods again, come to me, surely, in direct descent from the past and speaking of Olympus as plainly as the last beacon spoke to the watchman on Agamemnon's house of the burning of Troy.

So it happened one year that, when Spring was at hand, I could think of nothing pleasanter than to go with him to meet it in a country which we knew.

On the first morning our shoes rang like a peal of bells together on the cobbled village path; the horses' hoofs on the moist firm road made a clear "cuck-oo" as they rose and fell; and far off, for the first time in the year, we heard a plough-boy, who remembered spring and knew that it would come again, shouting "Cuckoo! cuckoo!"

Often it happened that a lane led us to the sudden top of a hill and seemed to end in the blue, white-clouded sky. As when, on the stage, a window is opened and someone invisible is heard to sing below it—to sing, perhaps, but a serenade, and yet something so heavy laden that if we could only understand it. . . . So for a moment, at the end of the aspiring lane, a window seemed to be thrown open in the sky and let in a music that silenced thought and even regret. I say regret: yet, indeed, as the fire round the martyr burned to roses, so our pleasant sorrows were changed, and never were we lighter-hearted than when we shared

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a heavy grief. And I know not whether we were happier each morning as we set out lazily under sun or rain; or when, each night, we hastened to our lodging with the speed which comes of hearty and rejoicing fatigue, and quietness and talk set in around a fire that we watched as if it were an invalid, until its sudden sighing death sent us (already with one hand in the hand of sleep) to bed.

Slowly we came to that wild, lonely and delicate land which we had seen in our childhood; and our dreams, when we remembered many things, were of nothing lovelier than that land. So clearly was one dream of mine a recollection that once again I struck Philaster for laughing at my fears for some young finches that a cuckoo ejected from a nest. I awoke a little pleased at thinking of the blow, but when we met in the morning I repented as I told the tale.

It was, as we saw it from the slope of its first hill, a grey, vast land; and its intolerable vastness made the soul ache as it wandered ignorantly and curiously, sore and yet eager, from hill to hill, as far as the verge, where clouds seemed mountains, and mountains clouds. For while Philaster and I stared and stared, our souls went out from us over the hills, and we were vacant, submissive and terribly alone. They went out further than the white, thin moon of twilight that rose, like a weird bird from a weird nest, from the furthest valley. As we possessed our souls again, we felt a little separate and strange. The landscape had apparently a power of extracting all the fruits of our characters, good and bad. We became odd even to ourselves, wondering what we should bring forth under that large influence. For a moment I forgot all that I knew of Philaster in perceiving what I had never known. Always fond of deep diving in the silent waters of consciousness, we lost our way and came disappointed back. But, looking down at the hamlet that stood as a lighthouse at the edge of that land, we saw that the valley was soft, with large lawns running to the edges of woods, all of that melting colour which green becomes at twilight.

On the next morning the blackbird's note (as it sang alone, uncertainly, before the light arrived) had not in it more of the sweetness of soft rain than the light summons of Philaster beneath my window; nor was the song, or the clinking of the dairy pails,

more in harmony with the kind of morning I guessed at, as I watched the dimity curtain whitening, but with gold in it. For the moment his voice seemed to me to be superior to it all, to be the morning's most perfect flower, to be the eloquence of which all else was a superb applause. He dug his heel into the sweet grass and cut down a daffodil, as a king with his equipage might trample on a beggar as he went to be crowned. He was a captain and discoverer of nature; a king, and the dawn his banner, the white stars his crown. Yet I thought at first that there was something arrogant in his joy. I find a melancholy in all sweet music: in his voice there was none. But suddenly he sang

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as he went further among the apple trees, and there was just a shadow upon the song, just a glimmer of dew from Phlegethon in the stream of it. As, when we see a proud, high summer heaven of white and blue plunged in a shadowy pool, the shadows and the very act of looking down give the true image a sadness: in that way the song was charged, and I rejoiced as I moved and broke up the sleeping beams and shadows in my room.

Then, for a little while, we sat in a room that was near to the orchard; and beyond the orchard was a barn. We could not talk, and I went out to the barn and found that a lattice window concealed me and yet allowed me to look at him. I could see also the valley and the hills; hundreds of oaks; a river that swayed its irises; a grey, distant, unreal house that wanted my fancy to people it: but I knew not what they meant, and they were as things mentioned in a dull book, until my curving glance fell again upon Philaster, and then all were harmonized. In every wood and hollow we passed that day he strengthened the natural spell, and he seemed to stand to them as the artist's name in the corner to a picture. A completeness of vitality in limbs and brains and senses gave him an importance in his surroundings of cloud and hill and river, and a relation to them, such as may perhaps be discovered in all men by archangelic, in few by mortal, eyes. Never have I seen or read or dreamed of a man who was so at one with all things. Seeing him, I believed that sun and moon and stars and sea and trees and beasts and flowers were all

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one commonwealth. That this is so I have always known, but the knowledge mattered not until I saw Philaster. All that he was, all that he did, I believe, was related to all other things. He depended on the great oaks we passed, and they on him, for something of their life. . . .

Yet when I saw him last, as was my fortune—a clean skeleton, which ants traversed in their business, among fir and bracken and earth embossed with moss like moles—he was not less in harmony with all things than before, while a dead leaf wandered past the moon, and the branchwork of a solitary hemlock stood mightily up and wrote upon the pale blue sky a legend which said that October had come and denied April and May and June.

EDWARD THOMAS